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A speech of challenges on teaching technical courses in the medium of Chinese

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Talk by D.D. Waters, J.P., Assistant
Director of Education (Technical) at the
Seminar on Design of Courses of English
for Specific Purposes, for Teachers in
Technical Institutes, held on Saturday,
21st June 1980 commencing at 9.30 a.m.
at Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute

First of all may I say that I am delighted to
have been invited to come here today to speak at
this seminar.

I must, however, make one thing very clear and
that is I am not a trained English teacher. But, having
said that, I would like to add that I am very interested
in the subject and, as many of you may know, I have done
a certain amount of writing in this field. Let me add,
I consider the subject to be a very important one.

I can remember back in the mid 1950s when the
then Anglican Bishop, Bishop Hall, visited the old
Technical College which was situated in Wood Road at the
time. He made a suggestion that a number of courses
should be run in the medium of Chinese. This was frowned
upon by many people because although in Hong Kong at that
time the old Technical College was very much, "all things
to all men", nevertheless, almost without exception,
every course was run in the medium of English.

It was not until the mid 1960s that the move
to run more courses in the medium of Chinese (Cantonese
for spoken work) really caught on. Pre-apprentice
and craft courses were first started at the Technical
College (it had moved to Hunghom in 1957) in 1964 and
these were largely taught in Chinese.

/An effort

An effort was also made, in the mid 1960s, to run evening technician courses in the medium of Chinese but some resistance was met. Teachers complained that they themselves had been taught in English and that they were not familiar with many of the technical terms in Chinese. They generally preferred to teach in English.

Again, many of the students, even though some of them had a very limited knowledge of English, did not want to learn their technical subjects in Chinese. They felt, rightly or wrongly, that the fact that they were attending a course conducted in the medium of English would help to improve their English. In many cases, we advised students that they ought to attend a course conducted in Chinese. Many, however, resisted and some even dropped out if they could not attend the course in the language of their choice.

I fully appreciate that we often have a problem in obtaining suitable teaching material, including textbooks in Chinese. This is possibly one of the reasons why, very often, courses are run in English when they would be more appropriately run in Chinese. Hopefully, over the years more suitable teaching material in Chinese will become available.

This is why, in some cases, we have the hybrid course in which ~~oral~~ instruction is given in Chinese, except for technical terms which are in English. Written material is also in English. This is by no means the perfect answer.

/Technical terms

Technical terms in Chinese have always posed a problem but a great deal of useful work has been done in this field over the past ten years or so; for example, by the old Industrial Training Advisory Committee. The Hong Kong Training Council too has a committee dealing with Chinese translation.

The Productivity Council has also produced a useful glossary. In addition, the technical institutes have produced two booklets giving technical translations in Chinese.

Now that the above spadework has been done interested parties find it much easier to teach technical subjects in Chinese.

The Morrison Hill Technical Institute was set up in 1969, and moved into its new premises in 1970. It was only then that any real emphasis was placed on the running of craft courses on a large scale.

In fact, a number of complaints were received from various sectors of industry in 1970 saying that apprentices were having difficulty in absorbing their lessons because the medium of instruction was English. I was Principal of Morrison Hill Technical Institute at the time and I was the instigator in making the changes so that all craft courses were taught in Chinese. A circular was issued to this effect.

You may wonder why at a Seminar on English I am talking about Chinese. Well, I consider the two subjects to be related to some degree. Our craft courses in technical institutes should, I am convinced, be taught in Chinese.

/However,

However, many disciplines do need to be taught "Technical English" and we have consulted the Hong Kong Training Council in this regard. We now have more or less decided which students in which disciplines need "Technical English" as a separate subject.

For example, a craftsman working on a building site in Hong Kong generally has little need for English on-the-job. On the other hand, a craftsman working in a garage, where some of the customers are Europeans, often has to use English at work. Also most of the instruction manuals are written in English and there are usually no Chinese translations. There has been difficulty in the past in getting general English teachers to teach English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Many claimed that they were not able to prepare English lessons in specific subjects such as engineering or building etc. I fully appreciate that it does require more effort but I see no reason why a general English teacher cannot, with a little effort and research, prepare very adequate lessons in a specific technical or commercial subject.

I would like to add that in the late 1960s the Morrison Hill Technical Institute took an active interest in English for Specific Purposes. There was some resistance to this in Hong Kong at the time. Many teachers felt that we should concentrate on general English rather than ESP.

/A small

A small working party was set up under the auspices of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service. This working party did useful pioneer work. I did, in fact, prepare a paper on this topic which was discussed by this Working Party on Technical English of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service..

During the 1970s various papers have been written and we now have a far better idea of what kind of English we need to teach in technical institutes and who we need to teach it to.

What we have to ask ourselves is; "are we able to teach a broad English course to our part-time students who have so little time available?" I hasten to add, I don't think we can.

Is then it not better to concentrate on the type of English the student needs at work; namely ESP?

Regarding "Details of Posts" for full-time staff; perhaps this was carried a bit too far because when we first started to recruit English teachers for Morrison Hill Technical Institute, we were in fact looking for engineers and technical teachers and trying to turn them into English teachers. We found this often did not work and we have since come round to the idea of recruiting general English teachers and trying to give them help and advice so that they are able to teach English for specific purposes within various technical disciplines.

/In fact,

In fact, the new Details of Posts for teachers of English in technical institutes were finalised in the Autumn of 1978.

We are hoping to recruit a Head of Department (General Studies) for the Morrison Hill Technical Institute within the near future. This officer will, by his background, be a teacher of English. The intention is that he will be responsible, overall, for the teaching of English in all technical institutes and he will work very closely with the Principal Lecturer (English) at the Technical Teachers' College.

Together with Mr. Tongue I finalised a paper on the teaching of English in Technical Institutes earlier this year. I had previously sought the views of the principals and their full-time staff. The main recommendations in this paper are as follows :

1. Most of the English syllabuses need to be rewritten, this time in objective format.
2. Because of the limited time available to teach English, it is better to concentrate on clear-cut objectives on a frame-work of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) rather than on general English, with instructional material* tailor-made for the purpose.
3. English should only be taught where it is specifically required for the course programme in question.

4. In English classes tuition should concentrate on language teaching rather than on liberal studies.
5. The General Studies course syllabus should be rewritten as a Level One Unit.
6. Only qualified English teachers should teach English and they should be sympathetic to the ESP approach to language teaching.
7. More graduate English teachers should be recruited.
8. There should be more in-service training, including possible staff exchange schemes involving technical institute staff and other local teachers as well as teachers from overseas.
9. Meetings should be held at regular intervals between all teachers of English in technical institutes.
10. Advice and guidance will be required in how to teach English for **Specific Purposes**.
11. More suitable textbooks and teaching material will be required.
12. If time permits, the Principal Lecturer (English) in the Technical Teachers' College should be invited to play a part in English language teaching in technical institutes.

/I should

I should like to take this opportunity of thanking the Technical Teachers' College for organising this seminar. I appreciate that running a seminar of this nature requires quite a bit of work behind the scenes. This is appreciated.

I should also like to thank Mr. Ray Tongue for all the hard work he has done over the past two years or so in helping the Technical Education Division to improve its English teaching in the technical institutes. This has been invaluable.

Lastly, I should like to thank all our visiting speakers who have given of their time to come along to address us either at this session or on other days on which this seminar has been held.

I look forward to receiving feed-back and any recommendations you may make in due course.